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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
S.B. 12: AN ACT AUTHORIZING AND ADJUSTING BONDS OF THE STATE FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND JOBS ACT MATCHING FUNDS AND EXTENDING THE TIME PERIOD FOR DISTRIBUTING GRANTS FOR CERTAIN LAW ENFORCEMENT EQUIPMENT.	Support

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 127 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State Park and Forest, trail recreation, sustainable forestry, and land conservation issues.

On behalf of CFPA, I am here to support SB 12, specifically the increased bonding investment of \$15 million for State Parks infrastructure included in Section 11 of the bill.

As you know, people have been getting outdoors in record numbers in Connecticut, and according to DEEP, approximately 13 million people visited State Parks in 2021. Attendance has been growing by approximately 10-20% each year since the Passport to the Parks took effect in 2018 and has essentially doubled since the mid-1980's.

This increase in outdoor recreation provides significant economic, health, wildlife, and other benefits to our state. According to the most recent national Bureau of Economic Analysis report, outdoor recreation in Connecticut generated \$3.3 billion in revenue and helped sustain 41,721 jobs in 2020.



There are approximately 1,000 buildings at 110 State Parks that accommodate visitors, some of which date back to the 1930's and earlier. For example, the historic Ellie Mitchell pavilion at Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme is a beautiful native stone structure built in the 1930's with supporting wood pillars cut from trees harvested from each of the State Parks and Forests that existed at the time. This unique structure has hosted special events and generated revenues for the state, private vendors and the local community in many ways over the last 90 years. However, the structure is showing its age and DEEP estimates that the full cost to rehabilitate this structure alone is approximately \$30 million.

Overall, DEEP has identified a backlog of nearly \$130 million in critical maintenance, repairs, and other infrastructure improvement projects at State Parks. Some investments are necessary to renovate historic structures, but significant investments are also required to ensure facilities are more accessible to all, especially to those with mobility challenges.

For example, critical repairs are essential to improve the accessibility of public bathrooms at Sherwood Island, Hammonasset Beach, and several high-use State Parks, campgrounds, nature centers, and other State Park facilities. Renovations are necessary to the Eolia Mansion in Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford, Heublein Tower at Talcott Mountain State Park in Simsbury, and the Goodwin Conservation Education Center in Hampton amongst many others. Newer State Parks such as Seaside State Park also require investments to encourage public use and enjoyment of their special shoreline and historic assets in a way that is compatible with climate change, and there is so much more.

I encourage Committee members to consider the need for capital investments in Connecticut's State Parks as you would think about the need to invest in your own home over time. It would be unthinkable to go for 90 years in your home without some upgrade in your heating and cooling systems, or without roof or siding repairs, or without providing for wi-fi connectivity or other evolving technological needs, and much more. You know that if you let your home simply degrade rather than periodically make improvements, its value would also degrade over time. Now, think about your home being opened up to the public, and how you might take extra care to keep it in an appropriate condition for millions of visitors. In similar fashion, we ask you to support bonding in SB 12 for infrastructure improvements that are necessary, and in fact are overdue, to sustain the many values that State Parks provide to all of us.

Thank you for the important work you do, and for the opportunity to testify today on this bill.